1: Blackwood E-5 (1929-1930) 1935
ON6 Buka ON6
Kurtatchi

Except for this road, there are only single file tracks leading from village to village or to the taro gardens. Behind the villages there stretches for interminable miles the almost impenetrable tangle of large trees, small trees, shrubs, and rank undergrowth, well garnished with thorny creepers and hanging vines, which is characteristic of a tropical forest. Apart from the clearings made by the natives for planting, the only breaks in the maze of 'bush' are caused by treeless patches covered with imperata grass, often growing to a height of 3 or 4 feet. It is quite impossible to make any use of these patches as the grass overpowers everything. Even on the plantations no method has been found of eradicating it permanently. The natives burn it occasionally, but they know from experience that it is no use trying to grow anything in its place.

CLIMATE

I was not equipped for collecting meteorological data, but I made detailed notes in my diary every day as to the weather, and took readings from a thermometer (hung in the shade on my verandah) at fixed times as regularly as circumstances permitted. The result of these observations is shown in the diagrams. It will be noted that the range of variation as between the coldest and the hottest part of the day is much greater than that between the means for different months. This indicates that there is no marked change in the seasons, no period when growth is in a state of quiescence, as it is in winter in England. The trees are never bare (except the kapiok, which is an importation), but a few leaves are always falling while at the same time fresh buds appear. Instead of autumn tints there is always a touch of red or yellow in the breadfruit trees where some enormous leaf is ready to fall, making a patch of vivid colour in the midst of a mass of green. It follows that the people continue their daily round of hunting, fishing, cultivation of gardens, house- and canoe-building in much the same manner throughout the little-changing year, having no such well-marked cycle of activities as characterizes the lives of those living in countries with pronounced seasonal differences.

As can be deduced from their situation, the Solomon Islands have a tropical climate with a heavy rainfall. The rain usually comes in sharp bursts, often in the afternoon after a bright morning, and clears away rapidly. There may be several days with only a slight shower or two, but after such a period will come a

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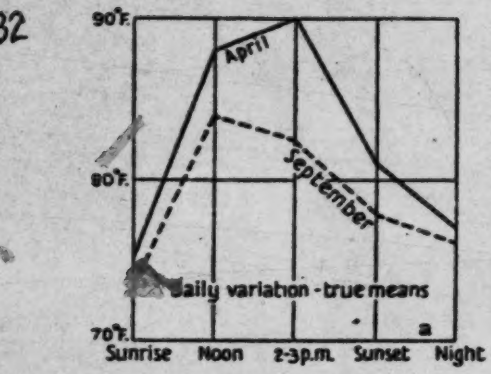

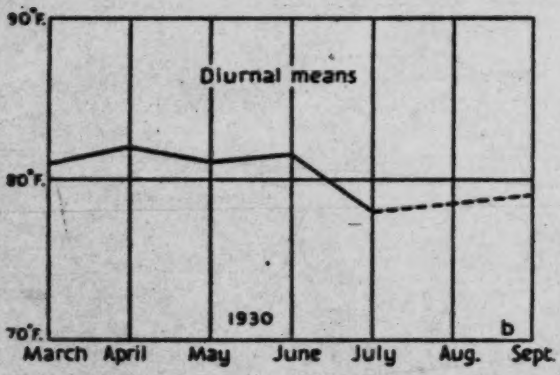

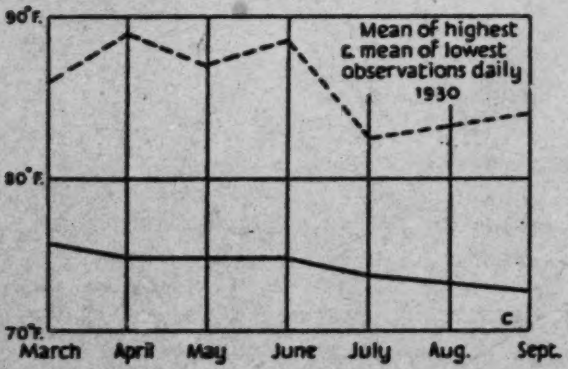

Fig. 1. Temperature at Kurtatchi, 1930

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tropical downpour lasting for several hours, sometimes so heavy as to present a solid wall of water blocking out the trees a few yards away. The natives say that it will rain on the day following one which has been exceptionally hot, and this I found to be true. While the south-east winds are blowing—usually from April or May till about November—there is less rain than in the time of the north-west winds, but these islands do not lie in the path of

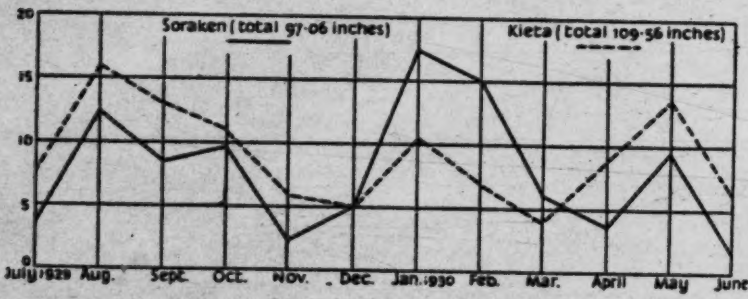

FIG. 2. Precipitation recorded at Soraken and at Kieta.

the definite trade-winds, and the difference throughout the year is relatively small. I had no rain gauge, but I obtained the records kept at Soraken Plantation for approximately the period of my residence, and those for the Government Station at Kieta for the same period. These are represented graphically in Fig. 2. They are not strictly applicable to Kurtatchi, owing to the difference in situation, but they will serve to give some idea of the rainfall in the area as a whole. As recorded in my diary, the month with the greatest number of days on which rain fell was February, with 21, but there were 20 in October. The month with fewest days on which rain fell was June (9), and the longest consecutive period without rain in the day-time or any appreciable amount at night was 14 days, from July 30 to August 12 inclusive. Rivers are liable to become suddenly swollen at any time after rain in the mountains; the larger ones are then formidable obstacles to the movements of the natives, as they rapidly become unfordable.

As regards wind, I made occasional, but not regular, observations on the movements of clouds with the aid of a prismatic compass. The prevailing wind throughout the year was south-east, veering to south-west at times during November, December, January, and February, with some north-west wind in January.

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This corresponds fairly closely with the observations recorded at Kieta. According to the statements of white residents, there would appear to have been much less north-west wind during the year I spent on the islands than is usually the case. Possibly in years when this change in the direction of the wind is more marked, there may be a more definite 'rainy season' than was experienced by me. The islands are outside the hurricane belt. Only on two occasions (Jan. 11 and July 9, 1930) was the wind strong enough to do real damage to the native huts, which are not built to withstand a gale. The former of these was remarked by the white residents as being a south-east wind, unusual at that time, when the north-west wind should have been blowing. The direction and force of the wind are important to the natives because when a heavy sea is running their fishing operations are badly hampered, and this, if continued for more than a day or two, means insufficient variety of diet.

NATIVE REACTION TO CLIMATE

All these people feel the cold very much. They dislike rain, partly because it brings cold, but also for the wetting, and when forced to go out in it will cut a large leaf, probably of bush taro, to use as an umbrella. During a spell of wet weather, with the thermometer on my verandah ranging somewhere in the 70's instead of the usual 80–90°, they went about with their shoulders hunched and their arms folded across their chests, looking the picture of misery. Any blankets or towels that they happened to posses were wrapped round them, and the few proud owners of a white man's vest or coat wore it day and night. They seemed to begin to feel cold wherever the temperature dropped below 80°. Fires would be lighted, and a group would soon gather round, sitting almost on the top of them, or people would light torches of coco-nut-palm leaves and hold them close to their bodies. I have seen them take a smouldering log and all but burn their skins with it.

They will work all day in blazing sun in the taro garden or fishing on the reef if the spirit moves them. But they do not sit in the sun, and they keep their children out of it. A mother may be obliged to take her baby with her when she goes to search for shellfish on the reef, but she will keep its head carefully under her hood. The more enterprising put up shelters behind their houses to give them shade.